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ABSTRACT

The extent of vocational education and training (VET) teachers' knowledge about and experiences of online learning and teaching was examined in a collaborative research project undertaken with leading practitioners of VET online in technical and further education (TAFE) in South Australia in 2000. Eighteen VET practitioners considered at the leading edge of online education in TAFE in South Australia volunteered for the project. Data were gathered through a survey, structured interviews, online research events, and two face-to-face workshops. The study focused on the following aspects of professional online practice: (1) producing new knowledge about online teaching and learning; (2) new professional roles and practices arising from the use of online methodologies; (3) new forms of workplace learning for VET practitioners working online; and (4) new organizational contexts for online practice. The study established that those who are considered leading-edge online practitioners are exploring and experimenting rather than systematically constructing their experiences and knowledge. It was concluded that the use of online technologies to facilitate vocational learning is not simply a matter of updating or refreshing traditional professional practice but instead represents and requires a break with the past and the construction of a new and more complex practice. (MN)

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Professional practices online: renovating past practices or building new ones?

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This paper arises from collaborative research undertaken with leading practitioners of vocational education and training (VET) online in TAFE South Australia (SA) during 2000.

The paper argues that using online technologies to facilitate vocational learning is not simply a matter of updating or refreshing traditional professional practice; rather, it represents and indeed requires a break with the past and the construction of a new and more complex practice.

This argument is developed by considering four aspects of professional online practice: producing new knowledge about online teaching and learning; new professional roles and practices arising from the use of online methodologies; new forms of workplace learning for VET practitioners working online; and new organisational contexts for online practice.

The research project

The primary research questions were structured to explore VET practitioner knowledge about and experiences of online learning and teaching. A subsidiary set of research questions explored the extent to which the conduct of research and professional development could be enhanced by use of the Internet. Data was gathered using a survey, structured interviews, online research events and two face-to-face workshops. The working paper arising from this research describes the preliminary findings with relation to all these questions, however this paper will concentrate on selected areas of interest only.

The project was a collaborative one, designed from the point of view that the relevance and quality of research in this embryonic field is enhanced when VET practitioners engage in research in partnership with research institutions. It also hypothesised that enabling VET practitioners to be part of a research community and to develop an orientation towards research and inquiry is itself a new form of professional development relevant to the emerging field of online education.

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18 VET practitioners considered at the leading edge of online education in TAFE SA volunteered to join the research project. The self-nominated group comprised 13 women and 5 men aged between 30 and 58. The average age was 44.8 years. Four participants were full-time continuing employees while 14 were full-time contract employees, mostly on long-term contracts. One was an hourly-paid/ sessional teacher.

The group came from a relatively narrow range of vocational and general education areas. Ten had a teaching background in Office Administration, Business or Information Technology studies. Four had an ESL/Adult Literacy background and two came from Community Services. Library Services and Women's Education were the other backgrounds represented.

Members of the group held varying understandings of what 'online learning' was beyond the concept that it is learning facilitated by the use of the web-based technologies and resources. While all members of the group reported that they used online instructional strategies, half also reported the use of offline strategies. Most were using a combination of instructional strategies.

The nature of the group's involvement in online learning was diverse, encompassing professional development or mentoring of other staff, developing and/or delivering online modules/training packages and involvement in LearnScope projects. Other online involvement included marketing online education services nationally and internationally; developing the functional specifications for an online virtual learning environment; helpdesk and technology support; and management of online enrolments.

Because of its self-nominating nature, small size and particular context, care is needed in generalising from the experiences of this group to the wider community of VET practitioners. Nevertheless, the findings do yield some propositions worthy of testing in other contexts and with other groups.

Theme 1: Producing new knowledge about online teaching and learning

In a VET policy environment keen to accelerate the take-up of online learning, the findings from this research serve as a timely reminder that online teaching and learning is still a very new area of human endeavour and a new area for VET policy and practice. It is an area in which there are no necessary or deductive truths and where bold hypotheses have not yet been put forward and subjected to rigorous testing and criticism. There is no single body of theory which is widely accepted as informing online practice in VET, although distance education theories are widely regarded as helpful and relevant. There is a good deal of uncertainty about whether institutionalised educational knowledge about the application of educational technologies or teaching and learning is applicable to teaching and learning in a web-based environment, and therefore there is uncertainty about the extent to which this idealised knowledge could form a foundation for knowing about online teaching and learning.

The research shows one group of VET practitioners actively, if not always consciously, engaged in the process of constructing and discarding knowledge about online teaching and learning emerging from their own (often eclectic) experiences.

To do this, they are telling the stories of their contributions, helping themselves and others to see the problems from many different points of view. They are continuously making choices based on certain presumptions, although these presumptions are not always conscious or articulated. They are creating a language with which to describe more clearly what they do, believe and value. They are sharing what they know in verbal and electronic conversations in their workplace, between workplaces and around the globe, thus helping to build common ground for action. From these practices they are establishing practical systems for the design, production and distribution of online products and services.

What they are not yet doing in any systematic or conscious way is standing back and reflecting on what inferences (if any) may be drawn from their individual and collective experiences. However, this finding must be modified to take account of the production and circulation of practitioner knowledge within statements in online learning manuals and formalised professional development activities. Nor are they yet systematically testing their interpretations of online teaching and learning (as distinct from techniques) against the interpretations of others within their own organisations or beyond.

Furthermore, the research suggests that organisational and systemic interest in or capacity to capture and manage practitioner-constructed knowledge for wider application and testing is highly variable and generally at a low level.

From the interviews it would seem that value clashes are emerging in both the implementation of online learning itself and at the intersection between educational philosophies and management philosophies about online learning. Practitioners' sense of education as a human service rather than a 'productivity' centre is causing a good deal of anxiety for some. Overall, there seems to be a growing tension between the organisational emphasis on administration, finance and class hours and the practitioners' own sense of professionalism, which is being progressively enhanced by involvement in online activities.

Theme 2: New professional roles and practice emerging from the use of online methodologies

The impact of online activities on the professional role and practice of this group of TAFE staff is not easy to distinguish sharply from the wider changes which have been wrought to the role of the TAFE teacher/lecturer. Nevertheless, the dichotomies experienced by practitioners are clear. On the one hand they are excited and challenged by their online activities, while at the same time they are feeling frustrated and pressured by lack of time, infrastructure and resources. On the one hand they have a heightened sense of professionalism deriving from their involvement in online VET, while organisational pressures seem to challenge their sense of professionalism and their professional identity.

Participants reported a general shift in their professional practice over the past five years, from an instructor role to a facilitator role; a shift not confined to or necessarily caused by teaching online. They were also experiencing a general organisational and systemic shift towards self-paced learning, and expressed reservations that this is not desirable for all learners in all instances. They felt considerable pressure to be more flexible and multi-skilled, and some reported feeling greater stress as a consequence.

Other contextual factors impacting significantly on the roles of practitioners include a stronger emphasis on budgetary restraint and income generation at lecturer level; a strong emphasis on accountability and auditing; pressure to meet deadlines and student hours targets; and the devolution of additional administrative responsibilities (formerly done at middle management level) to lecturer level. Cumulatively, this is having a negative impact on lecturers' perceptions of their professional role.

It seems that more tenuous employment conditions have impacted on their role and work in a number of significant ways. Especially troubling is the suggestion that the shift to individual contracts has caused some TAFE staff to be increasingly reluctant to speak out.

Importantly, the group also suggested that being on a contract had been a factor leading them to engage with online VET. They suggested that, as contractors, they felt a need to develop and maintain a profile and to keep a range of employment options open. This question of the non-standard nature of the group's work and the associated conditions will be further considered in the final research report.

However, for virtually all members of this group, their involvement in online activities has caused major and very positive changes in their professional role and practice, changed their perceptions of teaching and increased their sense of professional satisfaction and challenge. Satisfaction with their current jobs was high, with 10 survey respondents indicating they were very satisfied and 6 indicating they were satisfied. Most importantly, involvement in online delivery has been a very positive experience for the majority of respondents, increasing professional satisfaction for 15 of the 18 respondents.

When asked whether their first experience online had shaped their subsequent involvement, most indicated that it had prompted a fundamental shift in their professional lives. It has provided more (and welcome) work challenges, more involvement in planning the content and sequencing of teaching, more focus on the teaching process rather than the content to be 'conveyed', and more opportunities for team-based work, which they clearly valued highly.

As a result of their involvement in online learning, most participants had a positive feeling of being part of a big story beyond the confines of their own day-to-day work; of feeling that their professionalism had been extended by the challenges of online and - in most cases - acknowledged. However, a couple within the group expressed some dissatisfaction, noting that despite having acquired new skills and being recognised internationally, their institute did not recognise or utilise their skills in online learning.

Some participants expressed a degree of ambivalence about the way online teaching changes professional practice. They were troubled or frustrated by the way the online environment causes the teacher to become a learner; by the shift from being a 'knowledge-giver' to a learning facilitator; and by having to live with the feeling of not being in control. Others were concerned that they are under pressure from their managers to do everything online rather than finding an appropriate mix of face-to-face and online. In this they felt caught between competing pressure from their

organisation on the one hand and from their professional need to respond to the needs of their learners on the other.

Theme 3: New forms of workplace learning for VET practitioners working online

In the process of exploring the group's ideas about and experiences of professional development, it became clear that the traditional concept of 'professional development' - with its historical overtones of formal training and instruction, of behaviour modification, change management techniques and de-contextualised learning - is not helpful in explaining the complexity of why and how this group of practitioners came to know and love online VET. Despite their own participation in formal training or professional development programs and despite the fact that many had a formal professional development function, formal training was the least valued form of learning and the least useful source of learning for this group.

The single most important factor triggering the decision of the participants to become involved in online learning was personal and professional interest. The other two factors which seem to have been significant in triggering their involvement were the availability of resources and anticipated demand from students. The least likely drivers were pressure from the institute and demand from industry.

Other factors triggering the decision to become involved in online learning activities included the support of a mentor or encouragement by a colleague; anticipation of the benefit of technology in improving delivery to students; the opportunity to improve student access; the prospect of streamlining the administration of learning; wanting to learn something new; and seeing online innovations as providing a personal career opportunity. Equally important seems to have been the chance opportunity, being ready for a change and being in the right place when an opportunity arose.

These findings are significant in the context of the national VET system, which has tended to use international competitiveness and the national interest as rallying cries to encourage organisational and individual take-up of online strategies.

Interviews sought comment on the extent to which work colleagues were involved with online learning. What emerged was a picture of a group of leading edge, enthusiastic and motivated practitioners working with each other and sharing their experiences, but struggling (at least in this early stage) to integrate online work more fully within their work environments and engage immediate work colleagues in the process. It also showed a group of practitioners still operating outside the 'mainstream' of VET practice.

Where there were a number of people involved in online activities at an institute or a particular workplace, staff felt supported, and the exchange of ideas and information was a highly creative process. However, where there was only one or two practitioners active in online VET, there was a strong sense of workplace isolation. Nevertheless, there were indications of a growing receptivity amongst currently non-involved colleagues. Convincing work colleagues to become involved was seen as very hard work; requiring patience rather than a hard sell; and requiring the

development and application of multiple techniques to support and encourage colleagues rather than compel them.

When asked what professional development programs related to online learning they had participated in, almost all the group nominated both formal and informal training programs, and the majority had participated in development projects and action learning projects. Other professional development for online learning included web-based community building activities; volunteer teaching; online and physical conferences; facilitating and mentoring other staff in LearnScope projects; and being an online student.

Participants cited four main sources of their own professional learning.

Learning by doing. Participants reported that in the beginning, they had little choice but to learn by doing. Because they were leaders in the field, there was no one else to learn from - they were pioneers 'making it up as they went along'. They were also individuals with an inclination to learning through problem solving. Assigned real-life problems such as product-development projects, they simply rolled up their sleeves and did them. But this was not, of itself, sufficient to ensure appropriate learning.

Learning though work colleagues and teamwork. Supportive work colleagues and membership of a team is a key factor in learning about online VET by this group. When asked how they first learned to use information and communications technology for online learning, the source most frequently cited was work colleagues in the same discipline area. Colleagues with online learning or discipline expertise were and remain the most used source of information and advice about online learning.

Within the group, and reflecting TAFE SA priorities and strategies, mentoring is widely used to develop staff capability to work online. Different meanings are attached to the word 'mentor' by group members, with some referring to informal collegial support, while others used it in a more formal sense of structured and planned personal coaching and development. Mentoring will be considered further in the research report, but clearly it is widely accepted, practised and valued by the group as a method of developing online teaching capability.

Learning through communities of practice: The research highlighted a community of practice as a very important source of learning. Communities of practice, while intersecting with the concept of work teams and supportive work colleagues, offered wider learning possibilities unconstrained by place and time. Despite feeling locally isolated at times, when participants were asked directly whether they felt part of a community of online practitioners, the overwhelming answer was yes, although it was also clear that each participant felt they belonged to very different communities of practice.

Learning through formal off-the-job professional development: Most members of the group seemed to have little confidence in formal off-the-job professional development activities, expressing scepticism about the quality of the formal activities they had been involved in. This was not however a universally held view; for some,

conferences, overseas study tours and workshops and fellowships had provided good learning opportunities.

The research suggests that the point in time that participants first became involved in online activities may influence views about formal professional development. Those who became involved more recently would have been entering the field at a time when more sophisticated and structured professional development had become available; when the experience of the first wave of innovators had been captured in the first manuals and programs. Thus the experiences of more recent online practitioners would in all probability be more positive than those who participated in first-wave professional development.

Theme 4: New organisational contexts for online practice

The design of individual jobs and the organisation of work play a critical part in opening or closing learning possibilities. Many jobs, even professional jobs, are not big enough for the people who hold them, and these are unlikely to be a source of learning. Work can be organised in ways to encourage or discourage staff creativity and learning. In this area of knowledge-in-the-making, where staff have to construct and disseminate most of the knowledge themselves, the design of their jobs and their work processes become central to the online endeavour.

The most striking thing about this group of practitioners was that their jobs were broad in scope and offered much variety and discretion. Multiple roles were the norm, with only 3 of the 18 participants describing a single role. Nearly half of the respondents had three or more roles. These roles spanned technical, instructional, content development, marketing and management roles. Eleven respondents had some form of coordination role such as program or project coordinator, or staff manager. Seven had some involvement in professional development for other staff, or a mentor role. Many had been involved in various pilot projects and 12 of the group indicated they had a major role in online education.

In terms of job design, the roles of program design, materials development and teaching may have been separated in the past, but this was generally considered undesirable. Three quarters of the participants disagreed or disagreed strongly with the statement 'In the area of online learning, design, development and teaching are really separate and distinct activities, best done by people with different skills'. This and other findings point to the need for jobs in the area of online teaching and learning to be strongly integrated and multifunctional.

Another recurring theme in participant responses was that job discretion and work freedom was important to learning how to facilitate online learning. Freedom to create, freedom of choice to participate and freedom to make mistakes were ideas consistently evoked as important factors facilitating staff learning.

Directions for 2001

During this research it soon became apparent that the concept of changing roles and practices was not sufficient to fully describe and explain the range and nature of the work experiences reported by the research participants. In particular, two central ideas emerged as the research project drew to a close. First, that designing,

developing and facilitating online learning systems and programs either forces, or makes necessary, changes in work organisation and new work practices. Second, that the organisation and practice of online work is deeply influenced by, among other things, the structural and cultural characteristics of the organisation within which work is performed.

Ultimately this will have implications not only in the way organisations structure work, but also for professional development. At present, there is a heavy reliance on traditional forms of professional development as the source of teachers' learning about online teaching and learning. This research has shown that structured professional development (whether work-based or not) is not necessarily the primary source of learning for online practitioners. They are gaining skills and understandings, and creating knowledge through complex combinations of the design and scope of their work, as well as work-based and other structured developmental experiences.

In 2001 this research program will continue by focusing on two areas: the influence of job design and work organisation, and the influence of professional development, on the way VET professionals develop their online practices.

Conclusion

This paper touches on themes only and does not provide details of the findings with respect to those themes. However, it does serve to show that those we consider leading-edge online practitioners are exploring and experimenting rather than systematically constructing their experiences and knowledge. Similarly, their employing organisations are not systemically encouraging or harvesting value from these innovators. Three papers will emerge from the 2000 phase of this research program. One will deal with the method of the research, the second will concentrate on the emerging implications of the organisation of work and job design, while the third will concentrate on the apparent influence for professional development.

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